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ABSTRACT

This paper examines child care quality and the effects of in-home and out-of-home child care on children's quality of life, focusing on the results of a 1992 study of child care in northern and central Italy. The study surveyed the parents of 2,158 toddlers cared for exclusively in the home and 2,346 toddlers attending public day care centers. It found similar percentages of intact families and families in which both parents worked among both groups, and that choice of care was related to the mother's employment and, when she is employed, to the socioeconomic status of her job. Mothers in higher paid and higher prestige positions were more likely to use paid caregivers and day care facilities than lower paid mothers, who relied more on relatives for help in caring for their children. The study also found that children in day care centers tended to have more social interactions with peers, spend less time watching television, and spend more time with their fathers than children who were cared for by their mothers or other caregivers. (Contains 18 references.) (MDM)

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Quality of child care and children's quality of life.

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McCartney, Phillips & Scarr (1993) have recently pointed out that "child care is part of a complex social ecology" (p. 691) and that the effects of child care therefore depend on contextual variables. This assertion holds good also in a broader sense. Assessment of the quality of child care and of its effects on the child's future well-being must start from an assessment of the significance of child care in the actual lives of children and their families. In other words, analysis of child care has to be carried out in relation to all the different systems that make up the complex social ecology of which child care forms part (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Future discussion and a new research agenda are to be focused on this relationship.

Although the nature of child care and the conditions of family life have often been found to interact in affecting the child's development, thorough investigation is still needed on the relationship between child care itself and the context of the child's life within the family. The issue most often raised in this connection has obviously been that of mothers' work. Research has dwelt for years on the possible negative effects of the mother's job in imposing premature separation upon the child and impeding the growth of attachment bonds. As Scarr & Eisenberg (1993) point out, this approach loses sight of the fact that, in all the industrialized countries, participation in the labour force is a necessity for most women, including the mothers of young children. Thus, the relationship between the mother's employment and child care, and its effects on the child development, has simply been assumed in a stereotyped chain of cause and effects. Yet, it appears increasingly clear today that these elements interact with one another in a multivariate system. One of

the nodes of this system is the interaction between the mother's employment, its opportunities, and the availability and choice of child care. In order to analyze this interaction, we have to take into account both the mother's employment and her inactivity and all the forms of child care, in the home and outside the home. From this analysis, new issues will emerge with regard to the quality of day care. In this contribution, I will discuss some of these briefly, with particular reference to child care in Italy.

1. Mothers' work and child care provisions in Italy.

In Europe, as in all industrialized countries, an increasing proportion of women go out to work even when they are the mothers of young children. A recent study by the Childcare Network of the Commission of European Communities (1991) reports an average increase of 8.7% in working mothers with children aged 0-9 in 10 European countries between 1985 and 1991. In Italy, over half the women with children aged under 10 participated to the labour force in 1991 (whether actually employed or not). The study shows a sharp difference between central-northern Italy and the southern regions as regards the percentage of women in the labour force. This is due to a historical difference rooted in Italy's industrial development. Thus, the percentages for working mothers in some of the central and northern regions are higher than the European average.

The child care system in Italy is divided sharply into two parts according to age. In 1991-92 over 90 % of children aged from 3 to 6 (the starting age for compulsory education) attended the *scuola materna* (a preschool institution that is public and free of charge). Very little difference is found between the areas of northern (96%),

central (97.5%) and southern Italy (82.5%). These high percentages are found despite the fact that such schooling is in no way compulsory and that the percentage of working mothers is quite lower.

The state of affairs is very different for children under 3. Only about 6% of children aged between 3 and 36 months attend *asili nido* (daycare centers), which are mostly set up and run by the local governments. The percentage of infants and toddlers attending such centers also varies considerably from region to region (0.7 % - 1.2 % in Campania and Sicily as against 14.6%-19% in Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna). The *asilo nido* takes care of children for the entire duration of the normal working day, being open in most cities from 7-7.30 am to 5-6.00 pm. Parents pay fees which vary according to family income and can also differ substantially from city to city. Apart from a number of new educational services for toddlers, which exist in few cities and will be discussed below, the *asilo nido* is the only known provision for children under 3. It is therefore of interest when examining the relationship between child care and mothers' work to establish a separate category for mothers with children under 3, when access to the *scuola materna* is readily available and almost universal.

It should be stressed that the sources are unanimous in registering considerable participation in the labour force also by mothers of children under 3. The above-mentioned EC study reports that in 1990 the difference between the figures for employed mothers with children aged 0-2 and employed mothers with children aged 3-9 was the lowest in all European countries (only 2%). Data for 10 regions in central and northern Italy drawn from the Multigoal Survey on Families/Italian National Institute of Statistics (Musatti 1992) show

that in 1987 over half the mothers with children aged 12-36 months work, while in the southern regions, only a third of mothers with children aged under 3 were employed (the percentage of mothers looking for work was admittedly higher). The data also show clearly that the determining variable for the participation of mothers in the labour force is their educational level. While a low level of education makes it difficult to get a job in any part of Italy (and especially in the south), higher qualifications push women out of the house both in the north and in the south despite a fairly sluggish employment market and *even when they have children aged under 3*.

In sum, also in Italy, there is a very strong trend towards greater participation by women in the labour force and it is problems regarding the labour market that may discourage participation rather than considerations of child care. A number of questions thus are to be raised. Given that only a certain proportion of working mothers have access to daycare centers, which families do in fact make use of this public provision? When an *asilo nido*, i.e. the only regulated form of day care existing outside the family, is either not available or rejected, how do working mothers solve the problem of providing their children with day care? What care options are available and what are the crucial factors and motives involved in choice? When a mother stays at home and takes care of the child full-time, how is her daily life organized? What cognitive experiences and forms of socialization do children undergo in the different care contexts?

2. Child care options in Italy.

I approached these questions in a study carried out together with the Gruppo Nazionale Nidi-Infanzia (National Group on Daycare

Centers), on the daily life of children aged between 12 and 36 months and living in 10 regions in central and northern Italy (Musatti, 1992). In these regions 53.7 % of mothers with toddlers aged 1-2 are employed and 8.8% of all the toddlers receive center-based care in a public setting (asilo nido). A total of 4,504 families with toddlers were requested to complete a questionnaire: 2,158 toddlers were cared for exclusively in the home and 2,346 toddlers were attending an *asilo nido*. The questionnaire consisted of a time-budget grid and a number of questions regarding demographic and socioeconomic data on the child's family. For children not attending daycare centers, interviewees were also asked to indicate the person normally responsible for taking care of them during the working day.

In the group of families with children cared for exclusively in the home, we found the same percentages of intact families and of families in which both parents were working as in ISTAT/Multi-goal Survey. Although high school educated parents were slightly overrepresented in our group, a wide range of different socioeconomic statuses were found. During the working day, half of the toddlers were cared for by their mother, about a third by their grandmother or other relatives (fathers only 0.9%). Less than 10 % of the children were cared for by a paid babysitter, while very few children (0.6 %) by a minder.

How does the choice of the caregiving person vary? A set of analyses testing the interactions of the choice of care with the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the families, clearly indicated that the choice of care is related to the mother's employment and, when she is employed, to her job. Both the mother's

employment and her job are determined by the mother's education. Thus, nonemployed mothers, who usually have a low level of education, mainly care for their children full time. Also some of the working mothers care for their child by themselves as in other countries. However, almost the half of them ask for the grandmother's or other relative's support. Statistical analysis shows that this choice is preferred by mothers employed in low level jobs, while medium-high level employed mothers were more frequently found to use a paid help, that is a babysitter caring for the child at the child's home. This relationship between the mother's job and income and the choice of care is consistent with data from the United States, UK, and France (Melhuish & Moss, 1991).

The families of the toddlers attending an *asilo nido* run by the local government were found to be quite similar to the ones described above, and we found the same range of mothers' and fathers' education levels and jobs. Although, in this group, employed mothers, whose access to the *asilo nido* is facilitated by regulations, were overrepresented (84.8 %), it must be stressed that, in this survey as well as in other Italian studies (Ingrosso, 1988), quite a high percentage of nonemployed mothers were found to use an *asilo nido*.

The mothers' socioeconomic status was found to affect the motivation of their choice of a center based education for their toddler. Low-educated and low-level jobs mothers just demand to have their child cared for when they are at work; whereas more highly educated mothers, but also younger mothers , refer to their desire 'to provide the child with an educational opportunity'.

The number of hours the children actually spend in the center during the day was also found to vary. Children are admitted in the

morning over a period of some hours and can, in some cases, be picked up again early in the afternoon. Again, the main element influencing the length of the child's stay at the center is the mother's job. The longest stays are found for children whose mothers are blue-collar workers or rank-and-file employees, while mothers who hold more qualified jobs normally make a less extended use of the center. It is, however, important to point out that strong associations emerged between the length of time the child spends at the center and not only the mother's job but also her educational level, considered separately. The shortest attendances were found to increase together with the level of educational qualification. In short, the time the child spends at the daycare center seems to be related to the mother's working hours. The extent and flexibility of these hours depend upon a number of elements, among which employee status and level of qualifications are particularly important.

In sum, in both groups we found that the choice of child care depends on socioeconomic variables, both when the family chooses a private form of care and when the child receives a public center-based care.

What determines the choice for a form of private care or for center-based care? Our data showed that the families who opt for the latter are no different from those who solve the problem in the home. It may thus be inferred that center-based care can potentially meet the needs of many more families with toddlers and that other choices are determined above all by the paucity of centers, especially when the mother works. In our study, the probability of families choosing center-based care rather than other forms of care in the home was

investigated solely with regard to the families interviewed in Emilia-Romagna, a region of northern Italy.

In Emilia-Romagna, center-based care is more real as an option for families in that there are many daycare centers spread locally throughout the region and offering high-quality educational programs. In 1986-87 in Emilia-Romagna, 60.7% of mothers with children aged 1-2 were employed (ISTAT/Multigoal Survey). In the same years, a total of 323 daycare centers were operated by local authorities (source: ISTAT and Childhood Regional Bureau of Emilia-Romagna) and cared for 19.2% of children aged under 3, a percentage equalling that reported for Sweden (Broberg & Hwang, 1991), i.e. the highest among West European countries. Moreover, it must be noted that the percentage was calculated on the basis of all the first 3 years and would probably have been higher for the age group of 12-36 months. We can thus conclude that, in this region, the *asilo nido* does represent more than a merely hypothetical option for families with toddlers, despite the long waiting lists for places at daycare centers in many towns.

Direct care on the part of the mother proved to be the solution most frequently adopted also in this region, being in fact far higher in terms of percentage than the number of non-employed mothers. Thus, while some non-employed mothers entrusted their children to daycare centers (7.8 %) or to other persons, family or otherwise (2.1 %), 28.6 % of working mothers also claimed to be full-time mothers. The *asilo nido* option in fact came third after support offered by grandparents, who took care for a good quarter of the children in the sample. Other private forms of care proved to be quite less frequent.

What determines family choice as regards the different options? Taking the total number of families interviewed in Emilia-Romagna, we

used logistic models of analysis in order to predict choice with respect to the various forms of private or center-based care on the basis of several variables. The analyses showed: a) While the choice of care depends on the working status of both parents, who interact in influencing the final decision, the most important variable is always the mother's employment and job; b) The only other variable affecting the choice of care is the child's age. Full-time maternal care decreases sharply between the second and third years of the child's life regardless of the mother's employment. Even for housewife mothers, the probability of seeking help from the grandparents or sending the child to a daycare center full time increases in the third year; c) Working mothers with full-time blue and white-collar jobs are the most likely to send their children to a daycare center full time; d) Grandparents' support, which is generally free, is the most probable choice for working mothers, especially for those with low-level employment, among whom the probability of this option rises to over 50 % when the child reaches the age of 2. e) Paid child care (especially babysitters) is limited and reaches a probability of 10 % only for children of teachers and free lance workers. It is in any case interesting to note that this option is less probable in the third year for all children.

Thus, the mother's employment determines not only her choice of whether to take care of the child herself but also significant differences in the probability of the other solutions. The differences in income and working hours involved in different jobs appear to direct mothers' choices fairly clearly towards one form of care or another. When a full-time and low-flexible job and a modest income

make recourse to paid help difficult, parents are more likely to make fuller use of their right of access to the public provisione or, should such access be unavailable or unwanted, to seek help within the family network. And we can certainly assume that such help will be a substantial, full-time commitment. At the same time, while in the second year of the child's life more flexible forms of child care can be found - including paid help, a combination of work and full-time maternal care or limited use of the daycare center -, these forms become rarer in the third year, when the preference is for global solutions for child care throughout the working day. In sum, even in Emilia-Romagna, a region where the *asilo nido* does constitute a real option for many families and where women's employment is an established fact which not even the birth of children can bring into question, the options for infant care during the working week are limited. Even the choice between the public provision and private solutions appears to be not so much a cultural issue as an option which is open to some families but still unavailable to others.

3. Child care options and quality of care.

These findings provide some important suggestions with concern to assessing the quality of child care. Melhuish & Moss (1991) pointed out that there are two particularly relevant dimensions of child care choice: the choice to combine work with parental responsibilities and the choice of type of day care. Our findings indicate that both these choices are severely limited for the families interviewed. It is my view that this limitation raises a number of important issues. First, it appears essential to assess the extent to which the different forms of child care ensure parents a combination of work and care that is

balanced in both a psychological and material sense. In this perspective, assessment of the economic costs of child care for a community cannot be confined to analysis of the cost of a particular provision but must also take into account its effects on mothers' employment, family stability, and mental health of parents and children.

With concern to the public provision of center-based child care, all of this suggests that the quantitative availability of such services has substantial consequences on their quality. The real possibility of parental choice is the basis for positive dynamic interaction between the parents' material, cultural, and emotional expectancies and the present and future functioning of the center itself. This is a very important point, and obviously different from the question of whether the center complies with the expectancies of each parent.

Another point concerns all forms of child care, both center-based and private, i.e. the question of interpersonal relationships between the various people taking care of the child, parents, relatives and paid caregivers. Bronfenbrenner (1992) has recently provided a most stimulating theoretical framework for reassessment of the effects of the quality of relational context on child development. He has stressed that in an appropriate research design each relationship should be "treated as a context for a process taking place in the other". Thus, the quality of the relationships between parents and other child caregivers is most definitely a relevant issue for the assessment of quality of care and its effects on the child's well-being and development.

The question of relationships between the staff of daycare

centers and children is now being discussed in many countries. A recent study carried out in 6 European countries (IEDPE, 1992) reveals widespread efforts to increase communication between staff and parents and to encourage parent participation during moments of daily life or special social events at the center. This issue has been particularly discussed in Italy and a substantial portion of the working hours of the teachers in the *asilo nido* is used to establish good relations with the parents (formal or informal parent-staff meetings, shared social events, daily exchange of news when the children arrive in the morning, etc.). A considerable part of in-service training is also devoted to this question, which is regarded as crucial if the *asilo nido* is to carry out its educational program correctly.

Relations between parents and caregivers are equally important in private forms of child care. A study on time use and on the psychological reactions of mothers with young children in the USA (Michelson, 1990) showed that mothers who entrust their children to relatives rather than to a center during their working day are those who most feel the pressure of daily life. This greater stress appears to stem precisely from the need to adjust one's personal time budget to the requirements of another person, obviously on the basis of interpersonal exchange. In this perspective too, the limitation of options and the economic need, as we have seen, for the mother to ask her own mother or mother-in-law for help could have negative consequences on her well-being and on the development of positive mother-grandmother and mother-child relationships. This problem and the more general question of relations between mother and grandmother, mother and babysitter, mother and child minder should be placed on the

agenda for future research.

4. Children's daily life in child care.

Other relevant suggestions for the assessment of quality of care are provided from the analysis of the time-budget questionnaire filled in by the parents in my survey (Musatti, 1992). The time-budget grid was based on the one used in the international IEA-Preprimary project to investigate the main educational and care provisions for four-year-old children in the different countries. In the questionnaire, the interviewees were asked to provide answers, for each half-hour span of the period from 6 a.m to 10 p.m., to five questions: *Where was the child? What was she doing? Who was caring for her? What other adults were present? What other children were present?* This questionnaire provided a quite general type of data. It didn't provide information about the quality of that behavior. From it we could get just a general picture of the child's experiences during the day as they were macroscopically observed and reported. However, this questionnaire allowed us to get a wide range of data and to compare the quality of the child's daily experiences across different care contexts and different socioeconomic family contexts as well. The analysis of the day - or rather the different days - of toddlers in the different care contexts is undoubtedly a source of interesting information in itself. It should be immediately pointed out, however, that for the most part the comparison between the children's experience in a home care context or in a center can only be made indirectly, i.e. taking into account the structural differences of the ecologies in which the children spend their days. It was thus decided to ascertain separately within each of the two groups whether and how

the children's experiences varied. We will report here just some major findings from these analyses.

Children cared in the home.

First, we will focus on the time-budget of the group of children in a private form of care. The most striking finding was that solitude is in most cases the faithful companion of the dyad toddler + her caregiver throughout the working day. 27.5 % of dyads is with no other adult for more than 9.30 hours and 21.7 % for a timespan of 5.30-9 hours. For 36.3 % of the dyads, no more children are with them for 13 hours. Do the two solitudes add up for the individual child? How many dyads meet no other adults and no other children during the day, and spend their day exclusively alone? 22.4 % of the 593 dyads (more than a quarter of the total) who meet no other adult for 9 hours or more also do not meet any other child, while a further 22 % have short meetings - a couple of hours at most - with other children.

More than half (53.1 %) of children cared for at home never play outdoors, 63.6 % of children play alone for more than two hours and half during the day. 37.7 % never play with an adult, while a third (29.6 %) plays with an adult for more than one hour and half in the day. 79.7 % of the children never have social contacts with peers. Only 36.1 % watch TV (21.9 %) for less than one hour, while 12.5 % may watch TV for two hours and half.

The more lonely days were spent by full-time mothers with their child at home. Furthermore, the analyses provided evidence for strong multifold interactions between the children's experiences during the week day and the mother's schooling and employment.

Children of full-time mothers never have social contacts with peers during the working day, watch TV more frequently, and more frequently

never play with an adult during the day. We can, then, hypothesize that full-time mothers are prevented by their home duties from ensuring that their children have contact with peers or from playing with them, while they resort more frequently than other caregivers to the aid of TV. In short, paradoxically, the more the mother is apparently at the child's disposal for an unlimited period of time, the less peer contact is sought, the less she plays with her, and the more she uses the TV, probably extending her own high frequency of TV viewing to her child.

When mothers work, the time the children spend in TV watching or playing with an adult varies according to the mother's education and job. Children who never play with an adult or with educational toys are increasingly less as maternal schooling rises, while children that spend two and half hours per day in this play are found more and more frequently. Children of professional mothers and employees watch less TV than shopkeepers' and blue-collars' children, mostly cared for by their grandmothers.

In sum, these findings indicate strongly that the mother's socioeconomic status affects not only the choice of child care but also how the child spends her time during the day.

Children in daycare centers.

With concern to children attending daycare centers, the time-budget grid provides information as to how they actually spend their time in the center. In this connection, I shall just point out that the observation that there is not *one* daycare center but a myriad of different incarnations (Lamb & Sternberg, 1990) holds true also for our findings. It is of greater interest to report here some major

findings on appraisal of the daycare experience in the overall context of the child's daily life.

Do children who attend a daycare center spend more or less time with their parents than those who do not? One of the objections raised against sending children to daycare centers is that the time spent there might obstruct the creation and consolidation of strong bonds of attachment between the child and the parents, especially the mother (Belsky & Rovine, 1988). It thus appeared useful to compare the data on the time during which children attending centers receive parental care with the corresponding data for children cared for exclusively in the home.

As regards time spent with the mother, children attending daycare centers were compared with children cared for by others (grandparents, babysitters, etc.) while the mother is at work. No differences were found between the two groups: 21.5 % of children attending centers enjoy maternal care for under three hours (in the time span examined) vs 19.6 % in the group of private care children. It cannot therefore be claimed that the day care center leaves less space for the mother-child relationship. Like the other forms of child care, the daycare center simply serves to cover the mother's working hours.

Do children attending centers spend less time with their fathers? We compared the percentage distributions of time involved in paternal care for children attending centers, for children taken care of privately during the working day by someone other than the working mother, and for children of non-employed mothers. Among users of daycare centers, there are fewer fathers who never take direct responsibility for their children. The percentages of *absent fathers* are 50.5% for children attending centers and 54.7% for children

entrusted to someone other than the working mother, whereas 61.7 % of children with full-time mothers are never cared for by their fathers. The fact of using a daycare center thus seems to encourage fathers to assume care responsibility, while the mother's choice of full-time care seems to encourage the partner to delegate responsibility in this field entirely to her.

Do children who go to a daycare center have more or fewer opportunities for play with an adult than those who do not? Play with adult certainly means very different things in the home environment and in a daycare center. When a child's activity is labelled as play with an adult in a context outside that of the daycare center, we take this to be a probably dyadic play interaction between one child and one adult. Conversely, in the context of the daycare center it is probably a play activity involving a group of children, proposed and guided by an adult. However, in both cases the child receives attention from an adult with reference to her own play activity. The comparison of the distribution of activities in the two groups presents some interesting points. For children who attend a center, interactions of play with an adult are more frequent and longer. Unlike the children who do not attend a daycare center, very few of center children do never receive play attention from an adult, and many more of them receive it for long periods of time.

Vice versa, the incidence of TV watching is lowest of all among children going to a daycare center, the total absence of viewing being more frequent and prolonged watching (over one hour) less common.

A further question is to be raised. Are these differences generally due to attendance at a daycare center or does the time spent

in these activities vary according to the length of time spent at the center or to the child's family status?

The length of time spent at the daycare center does not affect the time spent watching TV, which varies only in relation to the mother's job, as in the other group. As in the other group again, TV watching is more frequent among children of mothers of low socioeconomic status.

The amount of time the child spends in play interaction with the adult is instead associated - but separately - both with the length of time spent at the center and with the mother's level of schooling. The children who *never* interact in play with an adult are more frequent among those who stay at the center for shorter periods and less frequent among those spending longer periods there. In sum, attendance at a daycare center guarantees all the children a certain amount of time spent in play activities proposed by an adult. This is supplemented for some by the hours spent at home. As in the group of children at home, the time spent in play with adult increases as the mother's schooling rises. Thus, again in this group, independently of the free time actually left over from the mother's work, it is her higher level of schooling that makes sharing play activities with the child part of a more or less explicit educational project.

5. Children's quality of life and child care policies.

The comparison between the days of children attending daycare centers and those cared for in the home supported evidence for great differences in the social and cognitive experiences made by the children. Yet, it showed a strong similarity among the factors accounting for variations in these experiences.

The time spent in play with an adult and in TV watching was found to vary in the two groups according to socioeconomic variables. Both these activities are related to the process of socialization, as both convey messages to the child from the culture of the adult world. Both activities involve culturally structured content as well as procedures and styles for accessing the adult world. Our analyses showed that there is an inverse relationship between the time spent in these two activities by children according to their families socioeconomic level. The mother's employment and schooling proved to affect the type of stimulation the child receives. Thus, we can hypothesize that the different opportunities provided to the child are the outcome both of objective living conditions and of educational models referred to explicitly or unconsciously by the mother. This is not the place to discuss the effects of one or the other type of cultural stimuli on the child's psychological development. It would be easy to contrast the supposed harm occasioned by TV watching with the supposed benefits of play interaction with an adult. It must be stressed, however, that we have no information about the type of TV watching carried out by the children, neither as to its content, nor as to eventual adult participation, and not even as to how the medium is used (Gunter and McAlleer 1990). On the other hand, neither have we any precise knowledge of what the play activity proposed by the adult actually consists in, of the content, form, and style of such proposals. In short, our information does not allow us to assess how far the different opportunities that the children have facilitate differently their entering into the culture of the adult world. What our data do tell us very clearly is that children are, already during toddlerhood,

exposed to different educational styles and that these styles are different according to socioeconomic variables. In other words, different and potentially discriminatory forms of socialization can be identified in the very earliest phases of the process.

Another major finding was that the family context has its own effect on the child's activity separately from that of the form of care, in the home or center-based. As it was pointed out by several authors (Hwang, Broberg, & Lamb, 1991; Melhuish & Moss, 1991), in assessing the quality of any form of child care a crucial point is to understand how the child's experience in the care context fits into and interacts with her experience in the family.

Having said all this, it would be wrong not to mention the main difference between the daily experience of toddlers attending a daycare center and those cared for in the home, that is the difference in social experience.

For children cared for exclusively in the home, one experience shared by many children across many contexts of daily life and families is solitude. This is often the solitude of being the only child in a world of adults. Frequently, also, the solitude of the child-adult dyad was found to be a constant component of many week days. To what extent does this physical solitude become loneliness (Peplau & Perlman 1982)? Larson (1990) showed that the psychological significance of being alone varies from age to age and is related in different forms both with the time organized by material and social commitments (generally accompanied in our society by a condition of sociality) and with the time of pleasure (positively associated by some also with withdrawal into one's own subjective world). It is not

unreasonable to suggest that the time an adult spends alone with a toddler - who is highly dependent for both material and psychological needs - can be ambiguous with concern to these issues. Nor is it unreasonable to ask how far this time of solitude contributes positively to the child's establishing a satisfactory primary relationship or, conversely, to her constructing relational structures of low flexibility.

The days of solitude were found to be typical in the life of many mother/child dyads. Yet, long periods of solitude also were observed in many other dyads formed by child and grandmother or child and babysitter. It is, thus, no idle question to ask how far this very private life of the child with others harmonizes with the privacy of the parents/child relationships.

The occasions upon which this context of solitude is interrupted in a specific search for infant sociality are few and not available to all children. As few instances are recorded of relations with other children during visits to relatives and friends during the working day, the only opportunity left is that of meeting other children in playgrounds. However, few children are given this opportunity: those with mothers or grandparents with more free time and, above all, the high-level job mothers' children, which are cared for by babysitters. For the latter, taking the child to the playground is generally one of their duties as well as a chance to break the solitude of the time spent with a child in a strange house. It is practically only on such occasions that the presence of other children of the same age is reported in the child's time-budget. And yet, we still do not know - and our questionnaire could not have told us - whether and how this physical presence of other children comes to an effective social

interaction in play, or even to a friendship (Mueller & Vandell 1979; Verba & Musatti 1989). We do not even know whether the process of socialization external to the adult-child dyad involves the dyad as such or only the child, whether attraction for another child is repressed or deterred rather than encouraged. Unfortunately, such information cannot be obtained from our data. Yet, they do tell us that being in the playground is not a frequent occurrence for all children and is generally ruled out during the week day for children from less privileged backgrounds.

In a general perspective, these findings suggest that, nowadays, child care policies have to meet new social and psychological needs of both families and children. The need for having the child cared for during the mother's working hours is still a very relevant issue as the women's participation to labour force is increasing. This need for child ward is interacting and combined with other social and psychological needs coming out of the daily experience of parenting and developing in our society. Particularly, our findings provided evidence for the fact that mothers and toddlers share a need of socialization.

Thus, new questions are to be raised with concern the quality of child care. A most relevant issue is that a variety of child care options is requested in order to give the families equal chances to access different child care provisions according to their needs and expectancies. In this perspective, in a number of Italian cities new educational provisions are being experienced, such as toddler-mother playgroups, libraries for toddlers, educational playground, etc. Thus, a variety of educational initiatives for toddlers and their parents is

associated with the traditional day care centers, *asilo nido*, in an integrated network of educational provisions for young children. In these new provisions, children can experience social interactions with peers and adults out of the family and their mothers can exchange information and psychological support with other parents and teachers.

Obviously, with concern to the time-budget of children attending a daycare center our analyses found neither solitude nor lack of contact with other children. Yet, the presence of a number of children and of adults does not in itself necessarily mean a positive experience of socialization. However, it must be strongly emphasized that, in many sites, this condition has provided a basis for the construction of a context in which the child can experience social life and acquire knowledge, in other words, potentially, an ecology of high quality. How to realize this potential is also a question at stake.

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